

Indiana State Museum

Educational Opportunities For Your Students

Famous Hoosiers

Madam C. J. Walker



Lesson Plan
Text, Activities and Resources
Grades 9-12

Madam C. J. Walker

Grades 9-12

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INTRODUCTION

Many fascinating females have made numerous contributions to our country's heritage. Information about Madam Walker will fit in nicely with American history studies. Heighten your students' awareness of the important role women have played in Indiana's history. The lessons contained in this packet are intended for use by grades 9-12. The activities are designed to be innovative and to meet Indiana Academic Standards. The text and worksheets are reproducible.



SETTING THE STAGE

To begin the lesson plan, you might want the environment of your classes to reflect women in America's history. This can be achieved by incorporating this theme into bulletin boards, class plays, art projects and whatever else you are doing in your classroom. We encourage you to use this information on Madam Walker as a springboard to further knowledge about famous women of the United States and the world. A post-test is included to help you assess what your students know about contributions women have made in our country and specifically about Madam Walker. A short list of famous women is included in the resource section of the lesson plan.

PRE-TEST ABOUT WOMEN IN HISTORY

NAME _____ DATE _____

Taking this short test will help you think about famous women of America. Do your best and discuss your answers as a class. This test is not for a grade but to find out what you know about women's roles in America and Indiana.

1. Who are some famous women in American History?

2. What role have these women played in our country's history?

3. Do you know who Madam C. J. Walker is? _____

4. Do you know where in Indiana she lived and what important thing she did? _____

5. What do you think makes a woman important today? _____

8. Do you think women of ethnic backgrounds have a harder time making their mark in the world? _____

9. Do you know the name of our First Lady of Indiana?

10. What would you like to learn about Madam C. J. Walker ? (List 3 things)

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

BACKGROUND TEXT FOR EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

Madam C. J. Walker: Entrepreneur



Americans have always professed admiration for individuals who embody the characteristics of thrift, industry, self-reliance and self-determination. Few persons in American history exemplify these qualities more than Madam C. J. Walker, who, in her energy, ambition and tireless work ethic, is a virtual prototype of the self-made **entrepreneur**. More than that, however, Walker used her fortune, influence and position to better the lives of others and provide economic and social opportunity to others born into humble circumstance.

Before she was Madam Walker (and it was “Madam” – no “e”), she was Sarah Breedlove, born in Louisiana in 1867, the daughter of former slaves. Her parents were **sharecroppers** on plantation land near the town of Delta. She was an orphan before her seventh birthday, and despite best efforts, she and her two older siblings were unable to continue working the land. Crop failure and an epidemic of yellow fever forced them to abandon farming altogether and seek work as domestics and laundresses, two of the very few occupations available to poor women, let alone young girls. Both, like farming, required exhausting physical labor. Her early teen years found her living in Vicksburg, MI, with her now married older sister, and working primarily as a laundress.

She married at 14, in part, it has been suggested, to escape an intolerable life in the home of her brother-in-law, whom she later referred to as “cruel and contemptuous.” Personal loss continued to haunt her, however, with the death of her husband shortly after the birth of their only child, a daughter.

Widowed by the age of 20, and with a young daughter to raise, she moved once more, this time to St. Louis, and spent the next 15 years doing other people’s laundry and attending public night schools whenever possible. Through it all, she was able to set aside enough money to educate her daughter.

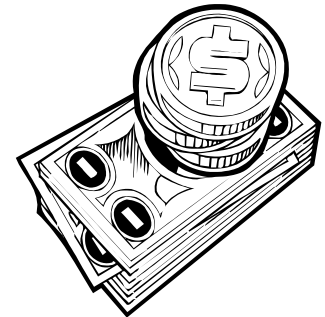
At some point before the turn of the century, Breedlove began to suffer from traumatic **alopecia**, hair loss caused by poor nutrition and harsh treatments intended to straighten hair. The condition was, and to a much lesser extent still is, a common cause of hair loss among African American women. She began to experiment with various mixtures to stimulate regrowth and more successfully straighten hair. She eventually came across a formula that, in conjunction with a newly developed type of steel comb, worked. She sold this, and other self-developed hair care products door-to-door to supplement her income. In 1905, ready to risk her future on her infant business, she moved to Denver and began selling her products by mail. It was in Denver that she married newspaperman Charles Joseph Walker and added “Madam” to her new name to lend it an air of dignity.

Dignity was important to Walker, both personally and professionally. The advertising that was developed to help sell her products stressed the importance of good hygiene and neat appearance. This was not mere salesmanship on her part. Walker knew too well the obstacles that confronted African

American women attempting to earn a living and make their way in society. She was to remain keenly aware of these obstacles throughout her success and rise to prominence, and would address them by various means.

An important step in this direction was the opening of Lelia College in Pittsburgh, in 1908. Named for her daughter, who by then lived in that city, the college offered beauty courses for women who could then use their new skills to earn a living. For those who lived elsewhere, **correspondence courses** were available. Yet other women found employment as sales agents for Walker's products.

In 1910, Walker solidified her position as an important entrepreneur by moving her company to Indianapolis and opening a manufacturing facility. At the time the nation's largest inland industrial center, Indianapolis was also the intersecting point of eight major railway systems and home to a vibrant and growing black community. All of these factors Walker recognized as significant. The railroads allowed for fast and effective shipment of product directly from the source to points all across the U.S. The local community provided not only a local customer base, but as importantly, a ready workforce.



Walker was not only interested in developing and selling hair care and personal hygiene products, but also in teaching others how best to use them. She trained a national sales force that in turn trained a nation of "Beauty Culturists." In those mostly pre-unionization days of labor strife, she organized her own workers into The Madam C. J. Walker Hair Culturists Union of America. Local chapters of the union were encouraged to become active in their communities and engage in **philanthropic** and educational work. Moreover, when they became active in the community, they were rewarded by the company for doing so.

Walker saw her products, and their proper use, as an avenue for self-improvement and self-pride: A neat and successful appearance would lead an individual to feel better about him/herself as well as presenting a positive image and model to the world. Too, she was well aware that the economic opportunities provided by her company, whether as sales agents, Beauty Culturists, manufacturing workers, or beauty shop owner/operators, were important in the African American communities in which they were located.

Beyond this, however, Walker knew that she was a role model and seldom wasted a chance to present herself as such. She used her own life as an example for others, encouraging them to take control of their own lives and make their own opportunities. By the mid 1910s, she was one of the most successful businesswomen in the United States and perhaps the most well known.

There is some speculation as to just how wealthy Madam Walker was. She is often referred to as a millionaire, but she denied this during her own lifetime. Upon settlement of her estate after her death, her total wealth was found to be just over \$500,000, including household goods. Regardless of total amounts, she was by any measure wealthy for her day, and she used her financial resources to engage in a wide variety of philanthropic pursuits. In Indianapolis alone, she was instrumental in funding or establishing the Senate Avenue YMCA, which was located very near her manufacturing facility and offices, the **Flanner House**, and Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, among other organizations. Nationally, she was an avid supporter of the NAACP, many black colleges and universities, and anti-**lynching** organizations. She put her money where her beliefs were.

She also put her name where her beliefs were. She instituted an anti-**discrimination** lawsuit against a local Indianapolis theater, traveled to Washington D.C. to protest **segregationist** policies in the War Department directly to President Woodrow Wilson, and, in 1918, attempted to travel to the post-war **Versailles Conference** as part of a delegation to petition for the rights of African Americans on that international stage.

She did not always have success. She, like the other members of the Versailles delegation, was denied a passport. Personally, too, she suffered setbacks. Her marriage to Charles Walker ended in divorce in 1912, seemingly victim to her very success and her personal ambition, which he did not share. Physical ailments began to trouble her as well. **Hypertension** and kidney problems plagued her, as did the general toll of years of hard physical labor followed by years of near constant travel for business and speaking engagements.



Leaving the day-to-day operations of her business to daughter Lelia (by then known as A'lelia) and her Indianapolis lawyer and friend Freeman Ransom (for whom the Indianapolis neighborhood 'Ransom Place' is named), Walker made one final move, this time to New York City. Thwarted in an attempt to purchase an estate on Long Island, she bought a four and one-half acre plot at exclusive Irvington-on-the-Hudson. She hired architect Vertner W. Tandy to design and build a \$350,000 mansion that would serve not only as her home and venue for hosting and entertaining a growing stream of admirers and friends, but would also create an image and example of what could be achieved through hard work and determination, even by a woman. Even by an African American woman. In this stately home she entertained poet Langston Hughes, activist and intellectual W.E.B. DuBois, opera star Enrico Caruso, and political leader and theorist Marcus Garvey among scores of Walker's own employees and graduates. The orphaned pre-teen laundress had traveled a long way.

And she was still traveling in April of 1919, when she became ill. This trip was back to one of her many former hometowns, St. Louis. Her kidneys failed her for the last time, a direct result of her battles with hypertension. She was quickly rushed back to New York by private train car, but she was by then beyond medical help.



During her lifetime, Madam Walker had dreamed and planned for a theater in Indianapolis that would serve as a cultural center for that city's African American community. In 1927, eight years after her death, that goal was finally achieved. The Walker Theater is still today an active and flourishing part of Indianapolis and continues to host theater and musical performances, cultural events and celebrations. Its unique design and rooftop sign are **icons** on the local skyline and cultural landscape.

Moreover, Walker herself continues to exert an influence. Her life still serves as an example and lesson of what can be achieved through hard work and determination. Her commitment to education, philanthropy and social action are still valid models for those who seek to better their world and their own lives.



V O C A B U L A R Y

Alopecia: hair loss; *traumatic alopecia* refers to hair loss caused by damaging chemical or physical hair treatments, often in tandem with poor diet.

Correspondence Course: a class or educational program offered by mail.

Discrimination: actions taken on the basis of prejudice against a person or group of people.

Entrepreneur: one who organizes and operates a business, usually the owner.

Hypertension: high blood pressure.

Icon: an image or symbol that represents an idea or series of ideas.

Lynching: to execute someone without a trial, often merely on suspicion or fabrication of a crime, esp. by hanging.

Philanthropy (philanthropic): charitable work or financial aid intended to promote the common good.

Segregation: to separate one group from another based on race or class.

Sharecropper: one who farms land owned by another person, often paying a portion of the harvested crop as rent.

Versailles Conference: 1919 peace conference held at the end of World War I.

Flanner House: Established as a black social service center in late 1890's, Flanner House served the black community with such programs as economic betterment, child care and guidance, health education, counseling, and recreation services.

T I M E L I N E

1863	The Emancipation Proclamation is passed.
1865	The U.S. Civil War ends.
1867	Sarah Breedlove is born.
1874	Breedlove's parents die.
1881	Breedlove marries Moses McWilliams.
1885	Daughter Lelia (later changed to A'lelia).
1887	McWilliams dies.
1905 (approx.)	Breedlove develops successful hair tonic.
1906	Breedlove marries C.J. Walker, taking his last name.
1911	Walker moves her company to Indianapolis, establishes production factory.
1912	Madam and C.J. Walker divorce.
1916	Walker moves to New York.
1919	Walker dies after collapsing during speaking tour.
1927	Walker Theater opens in Indianapolis.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

GRADES 9-12

Subject: Madam C. J. Walker

Duration: One – Three Classes

For Discussion

In her travels across the United States, Madam Walker used her life as an example to others to show what could happen if one was willing to work long and hard enough. Many people, male and female, black and white, took her message to heart.

Today, many people think of role models as specific to gender and ethnicity. Can you think of contemporary role models who inspire beyond their own race and sex? Do you relate to role models of other races and genders?

Activity 1

Objectives

- Students will use secondary source material to generate a list, seek answers to the importance, and write a brief description of role models they admire.

Indiana Academic Standards

United State History: UHS.2.12

Psychology: P.4.15, P.5.16

Supplies:

Pencils

Paper

Instructions:

1. Have students make a list of people they admire and might consider as role models for themselves.
2. Their list must include at least one male and one female from each of at least two ethnic backgrounds. Next, have the students make the same list, this time without including any sports or entertainment figures.
3. Have students list three things they admire about these role models. Have students get in groups and discuss their reasons for choosing their role models and defend their reasoning behind their choices.

For Discussion

Are there “black” and “white” standards of beauty? How about “Asian” and “Latino?” If so, what are they? How do they differ? How are they alike? Are there similar standards for male handsomeness?

Using a number of recent issues of popular magazines aimed at teenaged girls, such as *Seventeen*, *YM*, and *Cosmo Girl*, analyze and discuss the images presented of young women and men. Compare the photos in the articles with those in the ads. Are there differences there? Are there people in the magazine that look like you?

Activity 2

NOTE TO TEACHER: This activity will be best utilized as a group discussion. These topics may be touchy with some students and should be approached carefully and with a great deal of sensitivity.

Objectives

- ☐ Students will identify what beauty is and analyze how our society views it
- ☐ Students will create a visual that shows examples of beauty; and analyze their feelings about their place in the “beauty” standards.

Indiana State Standards

United State History: UHS.2.12

Psychology: P.5.18, P.5.16, P.5.13

Supplies:

Current popular magazines for teens from several ethnic backgrounds

Pencils

Paper

Instructions:

1. Based upon the images in the magazines, compile a list of qualities and features that denote attractiveness or beauty in general terms.
2. Compare lists. Do the standards for male and female groups differ? In what ways?

Activity 3

Objectives

- ☐ Students will interpret information and use it to create further understanding
- ☐ Students will explain the significance to their point of view to the whole class

Indiana State Standards

United State History: UHS.2.12, UHS.3.2, UHS.4.7

Supplies

Timeline

Pencils/pens

Paper

Instructions

1. Make a copy of the vocabulary/time line page and give to each student.
2. Have students rewrite the vocabulary words in their own words. Have them develop relevant questions aimed at clarifying and increasing their understanding of an issue or situation. For example, they would formulate questions they might ask Madam Walker about philanthropy and what an entrepreneur does.
3. Students should then answer the questions they have formulated. Have students share questions and answers with the whole class.

Activity 4

Objectives

- Students use primary source material to generate a time line that shows the importance of world events

Indiana State Standards

United States History: USH4.1

World History: WH.10.10, WH.11.1, WH.11.2

Supplies

Time line

Paper

Pencils/pens

Instructions

1. Using Madam Walker's time line, have students research other important events that paralleled her life events. Start with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Why would this event be important in Madam Walker's life? What was the cause and effects of that event? How did it impact upon society and especially African American women?
2. Have students make a parallel time line and write a paragraph on each topic and its significance to the time and Madam Walker's life. Have students share their findings with the whole class.

LESSON PLAN EVALUATION

Your feedback is important to us. We welcome your comments to help us plan lessons in the future. Please check your responses and return to the Indiana State Museum. You may return the evaluation by mail, fax, or e-mail to:

Attention: Teacher and Student Program Coordinator, ssteinem@dnr.state.in.us

Fax 317.233.8268

1. Please indicate the lesson plan you received:

- ☐ James Whitcomb Riley
- ☐ Madam C. J. Walker
- ☐ Young Abraham Lincoln
- ☐ The Anti-Slavery Movement
- ☐ Modes of Transportation
- ☐ Quilts
- ☐ Civil War Booklet
- ☐ Amish of Indiana
- ☐ Oliver P. Morton
- ☐ Fossils
- ☐ Ice Age Animals

1. Did you find the lesson plan easy to understand and use?

Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____

If "no," what was the problem? _____

2. Were the connections to the state standards appropriate?

Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____

Comments: _____

3. Was the length of this lesson plan

too short? ____ too long? ____ just right? ____

Comments: _____

4. Was the lesson plan appropriate for the grade/ability level of your students?

Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____

Comments: _____

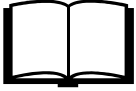
5. What activity did your students like the best? _____

6. What activity did your student like the least? _____

Why? _____

How could we improve it? _____

Additional comments: _____



RESOURCES

Books

Baker, Ronald L., *Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless: The WPA Interviews with Former Slaves Living in Indiana*.

Bundles, A'lelia, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker*.

Phillips, Clifton, *Indiana in Transition: 1880 – 1920*.

Web Sites

The World Wide Web is chock full of information on Madam C.J. Walker. A keyword search will yield literally hundreds of potential sites. Most of these sites offer very similar, very standard biographies of Walker and are thus indistinguishable from one another. The following are sites that offer more depth of information and/or more unique perspectives.

www.madamcjwalker.com

www.womenshistory.about.com Enter keywords 'Madam Walker.'

www.indianahistory.org Enter keywords 'Madam Walker.'

www.nbbta.com web site of National Black Business Trade Association offers a glimpse of contemporary black entrepreneurs.

www.africana.com/Articles/tt_006.htm leads to an article discussing the general history of black entrepreneurs in the United States.

Famous Women – There are many more women than this short list who have made contributions to American history:

Abigail Adams 1744-1818 – Wife of John Adams, mother of John Quincy Adams
- Supporter of women's rights

Sacagawea 1787 - 1812 - Interpreter for Lewis and Clark expedition

Sojourner Truth 1797- 1883 - First African American woman to speak out against slavery

Carrie Chapman Catt 1859 – 1947 - Founded National League of Women Voters

Helen Keller 1880 – 1968 - Fought for the rights of the blind and deaf/blind

Shirley Chisholm 1924- First African American woman to serve in the House of Representatives

Gloria Steinem 1934 - Writer and leading supporters of women's liberation movement in the U.S.

Hillary Rodham Clinton 1947 - First Lady appointed to health reform and is now a New York Senator